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AUTHOR Lambeth, Edmund B.
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ABSTRACT

This paper tells how a school of journalism linked two types of courses for master's degree candidates: a practical course in public affairs reporting, in which students worked in Washington developing news stories for hinterland dailies, and an academic seminar in media/government relations that required the writing of research papers. In order to link the two courses, a seminar research topic--reporters from Washington for hinterland dailies--was chosen for its relevance to the students' daily reporting experiences and its importance in media/government relations. Eight separate individual research projects relating to the topic were organized; the paper describes six of them. It then draws preliminary conclusions about the hinterland press corps that emerged from the students' research, notes that the program generated unusual degrees of enthusiasm and insight in the students, and suggests ways that practical and academic courses might be linked in more traditional journalism programs. (GW)

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Washington Correspondence for the Hinterland:

A Case Study of Directed Field Research

by

Edmund B. Lambeth
Professor & Director
Washington Reporting Program
School of Journalism
University of Missouri

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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Journalism educators commonly make a distinction between skill courses, the how-to-do-it curriculum, and academic courses, those that convey or develop a specific body of knowledge or place journalism in a social context. Useful as the distinction is, the very pervasiveness of it in journalism education may blind us to opportunities to relate the two types of courses in ways more effective for students, the craft-profession of journalism and society at large.

The primary purpose of this presentation is to report on one attempt to blend a public affairs reporting course and a course on media-government relations. Also, an attempt will be made to consider whether the experiment might be tried in other courses, especially those in which students are required to produce research results or evaluate the media.

The public affairs reporting course discussed here is an eight hour advanced skills course taken by M. A. candidates through the Washington Reporting Program of the University of Missouri School of Journalism. Stories published in the course are defended, as a body of work, in lieu of the traditional thesis.[1] Under supervision of a program director who is a permanent faculty member, graduate reporters develop features, occasional spot news and special series and send them to dailies which would otherwise be without such correspondence.[2]

The media-government relations course is a three hour seminar in which each student is expected to produce a research paper. Each semester information on the history, organization and operation of the Washington press corps and the dynamics of press/official relationships are presented. In addition, the seminar has a special research focus that can shift from one semester to the next. Typical

topics have included analysis of specialized beats, freedom of information laws and their administration, privacy, federal regulation of broadcasting and media organizations.

In short, the public affairs reporting stresses the "doing" and the seminar the "reflecting" aspects of graduate education with a professional emphasis.

In choosing the research topic for the seminar for the 1976-77 academic year, a conscious effort was made to pick a subject that would feed into the day-to-day reporting experience of the students yet at the same time represent an important aspect of media-government relations. The choice was a natural, one, in fact, that should and could have been explored earlier: correspondents from Washington for hinterland dailies.[3] Although discussed in a few scholarly works, these print reporters---the largest single body of newspaper correspondents in Washington---seldom gained the attention of the journalism reviews or the the slick magazines or scholarly journals. These were journalists who worked, usually quietly and anonymously, in the shadow of the Washington and New York dailies, whose editions circulated among the decision makers in the nation's capital.

These largely unnoted and unremarked reporters were, in fact, in somewhat the same position as Missouri's graduate reporters. Although they were older, more experienced, working usually for larger dailies than the graduate reporters and producing in greater volume, they nonetheless were writing for the hinterlands. As such, they faced similar professional problems---finding and managing sources, navigating through unending corridors of bureaucracy, translating federal jargon for Main Street, placing in context the work of local lawmakers, overcoming the communications gap with distant editors and preserving news values while not duplica-

ting the product of the wires.

The students uniformly reported at the end of their semester that in the research problem on hinterland correspondents there was a concreteness and pertinence they found to be lacking in research efforts of previous Washington semesters and in their own academic research papers on campus. Presentations by each student at the end of the semester indicated that they saw their own work as reporters in a richer, bigger context and that some had developed a taste for analyzing media-government relations.

To keep the students' research from becoming merely a series of interesting conversations with professionals, the research required a structure. Thus the program director organized eight separate individual research projects each of which focused on a different aspect of hinterland correspondence. Each of these sought to describe the operation of a segment of the hinterland press corps and to ask how well the public was being served by the existing deployment of manpower.

Below are descriptions of some of the key individual projects.

-"Regional Reporting from the Washington Bureaus of the Associated Press and United Press International," by Tricia White, Dec. 2, 1976. Describes operation of regional coverage, the backgrounds of regional reporters and reports on a small sample of editors' reactions to the scope and quality of coverage.

-"Capitol Hill News Service," by Andrew M. Smith, Dec. 3, 1976. Traces the origins of this unique news service, believed to be one of the few founded in the wake of a specific analysis of the adequacy of existing regional coverage. Financed in part by Ralph Nader, CHNS has not yet become a self-sustaining operation.

-"A Study of One Person Regional Bureaus in Washington," by Louise Tutelian, Dec. 3, 1976. With salaries ranging from $350 to $3,000 per month, these solo sentries have varied duties, problems and working styles. Some would not be able to survive were it not for free services provided by Congress and the federal agencies.[4]

-"Organizing Group Washington Bureaus: A Look at the Biggies," by Mark Nelson, Dec. 2, 1976. Patterns of organizations of the groups' Washington bureaus vary. Most organize by geography, by institution, by beat or subject matter, or some combination of the three. Several problems stand out: bureau manpower growth often falls behind growth in the number of newspapers within a group; as groups grow, a smaller proportion of correspondents will have worked in the communities for which they are reporting; federal agencies are usually under reported.

-"The Death of a Bureau: The Case of Landmark," by John A. Byrne, Decmember 1976. Traces, through interviews and content analysis, the reasons for the closing of the Washington bureau, which served newspapers in Norfolk and Roanoke, Va. and Greensboro, N. C. Conflicting perceptions of the bureau's role and performance, an uneasiness by editors with the bureau's autonomy, and unhappiness with the cost of the bureau, especailly in the wake of a $2 million court settlement against Landmark. (The case was unrelated to the bureau's work.)

-Toward a Relevant Correspondence for the Hinterland: A Case Study of Roanoke," by Liz McNulty, Dec. 3, 1976. Examines the occupational and economic structure of Roanoke and what they imply for correspondence from Washington, then compares those findings with what actually was reported during a month's time in the Roanoke Times and World-News.

Throughout the semester, individual reporters and editors from hinterland Washington bureaus appeared at weekly seminars to discuss the organization, coverage and problems of their bureaus. In addition, each reporter, drawing on his own reporting experiences, contributed to group discussions of hinterland coverage.

To have comprehensively researched the hinterland press corps would have required far more time and resources than were available to the eight print reporters working without research funds and devoting a fourth of their time to such a project over a three month period. But several important preliminary conclusions did emerge, a few of which can be highlighted here.

1) If one assume the desirability of special local coverage for each of the nation's 1700 or so daily newspapers, there is a serious problem of under coverage. Only one in four newspapers are represented in Washington by staff or designated stringers.

2) A number of wealthy groups with the resources to do so have not yet established their own Washington bureaus. Most notable of these are Harte-Hanks, Lee Enterprises and (until it recently joined Gannett) Speidel Newspapers.

3) The wire services have downgraded their regional coverage, with possibly serious impact on the adequacy of special local coverage for the 1200 or so dailies without their own correspondents in Washington.

4) The position of hinterland correspondent in Washington is definitely on the lower end of the spectrum by which the profession measures prestige in the nation's capital. More could be done to recognize and reward outstanding localized and regionalized correspondence.

5) The problems of hinterland correspondents---from poor communication with local editors to understaffing and lack of attention to federal agencies---have largely escaped the working agendas of journalism scholars and even a large number of editors.

For our purposes here, the question is whether the "synergy" encountered in the above outlined project---that is, the extra insight and enthusiasm brought to the research by students having worked as hinterland correspondents---has any implications for journalism education in other, more traditional settings.

Logistically, the hinterland project was made easier by having identical entrollments and an identical teacher in the skills as well as the subject matter course. This might be difficult but not impossible to arrange in a campus situation.

What might some of these "synergistic" projects be in non-Washington settings?

Example 1: An advanced public affairs reporting course emphasizing state government coverage could be co-ordinated with a research seminar on the state house press corps, an institution in need of both study and professional development.

Example 2: A specialized reporting course on covering the courts could be co-ordinated with a communications law course with term papers, say, on how well local news professionals know the substance of libel law.

Example 3: Newspaper internships, for which students often are given skills course credit, could be dovetailed with the research assignments of seminars in such courses as newspaper management, mass media and society, history of journalism and communications law.

Example 4: Basic reporting and feature writing courses which require students to do leg work in local communities could be organized to fit into a course on public opinion and polling, with surveys conducted on readership knowledgeability of local issues.

Example 5: Business journalism skill courses could be planned to mesh with a research seminar or media analysis course critically evaluating how dailies in a state cover its business community.

If students can be encouraged to attempt to freelance and publish their findings on their own or if they are told they will be given recognition for their part in a larger published project, or both, the incentives are much greater than if they are merely writing for the professor.

There are obvious limits to journalism schools adopting parallel skills and academic courses. For practical scheduling reasons, these co-ordinated courses with identical enrollments would be available in only selected areas of the curriculum. For philosophical reasons, too, educators might object to accepting an implied obligation to make academic courses dovetail with "hands on" skill instruction. For reasons of taste and ability, some teachers will not be attracted to parallel courses. Moreover, in some instances, the kind of experience sought in arranging parallel courses might be possible within a single course.

However, if the increased enthusiasm and commitment evident in the hinterland correspondence project are typical or even similar to what can be attained in other settings through parallel skills/academic courses, the effort required in trying the experi-

ment in on-campus settings may be more than repaid with interesting and practical research findings, better educated students and more stimulated faculty.

1. For a detailed explanation of the Washington Reporting Program, see "Supervised Stringing," in Journalism Educator, July 1975, pp. 40-43.

2. The program also provides opportunities for students in radio-TV news, magazines and photography.

3. For an excellent summary, see Blanchard, Robert O., Congress and the News Media, (New York: Hastings House, 1974), especially, pp. 165-180.

4. The scope of this subsidy is outlined in a speech by Rep. David R. Obey, D-Wis., in the Extension of Remarks section of the Congressional Record, June 6, 1977.